

Charles Robert Richet: Pioneer of Peace Psychology

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### Abstract

Charles Robert Richet (1850-1935) was a Nobel Prize winning physiologist, psychologist, inventor, and was committed to promoting international peace. He experienced battle as a medic in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, and was active in European peace movements in the 1890s. His anti-war writings in the decades before WWI focussed on the waste of war, including not only despairing populations but also the economic costs. During WWI, he was active in medical corps, devising and promoting battlefield first-aid methods. He predicted that Europe will suffer a 2<sup>nd</sup> Great War, more terrible than the 1<sup>st</sup>, if the weapons industries are not brought under control.

## Introduction

Charles Richet is not well known for his contributions to psychology, nor for his peace promotion activities. He was famous for his physiological research, for which he was awarded a Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1913 (Wolf, 1993). But psychology and peace were early and enduring aspects of his career. Richet was also an inventor. For example, beginning in 1888, he was experimenting with flying machines, almost beating the Wright brothers to the first flight in 1904, but going on to develop a helicopter (called a gyroplane), and helping establish France's first air plane company (Wolf, 1993).

## Psychology

His interest in psychology began as a teenager, experimenting with hypnosis among his peers. This early interest matured into scientific psychology, and his first research publications after finishing medical school were on the stages of hypnosis, which he called "induced somnabolism" (Dessoir, 1887). During his medical residency training at the Salpêtrière under the directorship of Charcot, Richet began using hypnosis to treat hysteria, a practice that was subsequently adopted by Charcot, Janet, Bernheim, and eventually Freud (Boadella, 1997; Wolf, 1993). Richet wrote: "*My experiences with hypnotism determined my career. . . Having tasted experimentation, I realized it was my path and I decided early in 1873 to become a psychophysicologist*" (Wolf, 1993, p. 26).

His connections to psychology were diverse. In 1885, Richet published a psychology textbook, reprinted in 1891, comprised of chapters on irritable membranes, the nervous system, reflexive movements, instincts, consciousness, sensation, memory, ideas, and will. In 1896, he presented one of the first studies of anorexia nervosa (Wolf,

1993). However, most of his psychology was focussed on neuroscience, including studies of pain, epilepsy, and the electrophysiological processes of the cerebral cortex, and in 1910, he predicted neurotransmitters (Wolf, 1993).

At the 1892 International Congress of Experimental Psychology in London, Richet argued that *“without brain, or rather without nerve-cell, there is no intelligence. The first problem of psychology is therefore a most complete physiology of the brain: relations of ideation to cerebral circulation, with chemical changes in nerve-cells, with electric phenonena; localization of psychical acts in this or that part of the brain; in other words a physiological resumé of the brain”* (Macdonald, 1892, p. 511).

He was vice-president of the Fourth International Congress of Psychology, where he presented a case study of a musical prodigy (Woodworth, 1900). Richet’s 1907 article on the psychological basis of morality focussed on mechanisms of imitation and sympathy. Through all of this, Richet was a close personal friend of William James, who was often his house guest when in France (Wolf, 1993).

### Peace Promotion

Wolf (1993) has reviewed Richet’s peace activism. At the age of 20, Richet served during the Franco-Prussian War in the medical corps. In 1884, he became an active member of the Société de la Paix, and later of the Société de l’Arbitrage entre Nations, eventually becoming president. In 1890, Richet presided over the World Congress of Peace in Paris. He was an advocate of international courts as replacements of war (Richet, 1896; 1899).

Richet’s pro-peace rhetoric often used practical arguments rather than moral. For example, his 1907 book on *Le passé de la guerre et l’avenir de la paix* [*The end of war*

*and the dawn of peace*] included a tabulation of the financial costs for the total of men, munitions, logistics, and destruction due to a war in Europe, coming to the unbelievable sum of \$50 million dollars per day. Once WWI was underway, however, the actual costs were closer to \$80 million per day (Ingersoll, 1915; Jordan, 1915). Richet offered his medical services to the war effort, including writing a manual on war nursing, devising a way to measure shock based on the ratio of urea nitrogen to total nitrogen in the urine, and pioneering the use of plasma transfusions (Wolf, 1993).

In 1916, in the midst of WWI, Richet published "*Les coupables*" [*Those who are responsible*]. He itemized the destructive costs of the war, and identified the causes of the war. 1) Kaisers Wilhelm of Germany and Franz-Josef of Austro-Hungary were more interested in their uniforms and petty affronts than in the welfare of the people of their own nations or their neighbours. 2) Europe's diplomats made secret agreements as well as public demands that could not be met, thus driving Europe to war. 3) The German Army organized an efficient, disciplined, war machine, with new weapons and a level of obedience to even kill prisoners when so ordered. 4) Public opinion for war was instigated by the newspapers and then amplified by the newspapers: "*Le journal crée l'opinion, et l'opinion dirige le journal*" [*The newspapers create public opinion, and public opinion directs the newspapers*] (Richet, 1916, p. 95). 5) The socialists in each nation, though advocating internationalist and humanitarian principles, nevertheless joined their militaristic compatriots in support of war. 6) The neutral nations (including Denmark, Greece, Holland, Norway, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USA) stood passively by while neutral Belgium was invaded and conquered. 7) Patriotic hysteria exploited the natural instinct to defend one's home: "*On nous attaque. Il faut nous*

*défendre*” [*They attack us. We must defend ourselves*] (Richet, 1916, p. 130).

After WWI, he argued strongly for the elimination of the weapons industries because “*without arms merchants there is no war,*” and if preparations for war continue unabated, then “*we will have another great war more terrible than this*” (Wolf, 1993, p. 126). Richet’s last peace publication was *Pour la paix* [*For peace*] published in 1930, written shortly before his autobiography (Richet, 1933).

### Conclusion

Charles Richet stands among other psychologists (see Rudmin, 1993) as a role model for contemporary psychologists, not only for his energetic research and writing on many aspects of psychology, but also for his persistent pursuit of peace. The causes of war and the costs of war that he described 100 year ago --before, during and after WWI-- still plague us today.

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